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Livestock and Products

Cattle Identification and Beef Labeling

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Approved by:

Richard Petges

U.S. Embassy

Prepared by:

Dietmar Achilles

Report Highlights:

Based on EC Regulation 1760/2000 Germany is administering a strict cattle identification and beef labeling system. In addition to the mandatory beef labeling system, the German food industry initiated a voluntary 'Quality and Safety' program which goes beyond the legal requirements and requires strict supervision and recording as well as special production management rules.

Includes PSD changes: No
Includes Trade Matrix: No
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German Cattle Identification and Beef Labeling Systems

Based on EC Regulation 1760/2000 Germany is administering a mandatory cattle identification and beef labeling program. The intent of the tracing and labeling system is to trace meat cuts at the retail level back to the individual farm or group of farms where the cattle were raised. However, tracing the meat cut back to the individual animal is not possible with this system.

In addition to the compulsory labeling program, the German food industry initiated a 'quality and safety' program (QS) which shall assure the consumer that the production of such labeled products is fully controlled and recorded based on legal requirements and additional industry-determined production process criteria. The quality and safety program is certified by the German government.

Cattle Identification

Cattle identification schemes have been in use in Germany for many years. Although prior to the BSE crisis, tracking of breeding stock was the primary reason for the identification schemes. The numbering systems were different from region to region and also different within the individual breeding organizations. As a result of the BSE crisis in Great Britain in 1995/96, the EU implemented a voluntary recording system which at first was only intended to segregate British beef from other beef. However, since such a negative labeling would have been discriminatory, the EU had to draft a regulation for a uniform EU cattle identification program.

The cattle tagging system identifies the individual cattle from birth to slaughter. In Germany, the identification number is recorded in a central data base in Muenchen (Munich). However, the recording and supervision is handled by different institutions in the individual German Laender (states). When a calf is born it has to be reported to the central data base either by postcard, by telephone or online. The farmer receives an ear tag and an animal pass from his local official veterinarian. The ear tag number contains information about the country of birth, state, farm and individual animal. The individual animal information identifies its gender and whether there were birth complications. It does not say anything about the production purpose, i.e. dairy or beef cattle.

The farmer is required to report the birth of the calf within seven calendar days. All later ownership changes also have to be reported to the central data base within seven calendar days. The cattle record has to be complete and uninterrupted from birth to slaughter. As an additional purpose, it serves as the relevant database for the calculation of EU cattle headage premiums. Farmers only receive EU subsidies for cattle production if the cattle records are complete and correct. However, about three to five percent of the cattle records are still incorrect. The German government also plans to use this data base for its annual cattle inventory. In the foreseeable future, it will also be possible to predict the beef supply curve based on the records in the central data base. For the individual farmer the data base is an excellent tool to manage cattle records. He is able to retrieve his cattle inventory for any date since the implementation of the system in 1998.

Beef Labeling

The individual cattle identification ends at the abattoir. The abattoir receives the cattle together with the animal passes and reports the slaughter to the central cattle data base in Muenchen. When the cattle is slaughtered, a brain sample is taken for the mandatory BSE test. These tests are performed overnight and normally finalized by the next morning. Special risk material is separated from the carcass and incinerated. At this stage, individual cattle identification is still guaranteed by electronic means. During the following processing steps it is not manageable for the slaughterhouse to separate the carcass parts by individual cattle. At this point, the slaughterhouse has to assign production batch numbers for at maximum one day production. An average daily production amounts to about 500 of head cattle. Normally the lots are significantly smaller since slaughterhouses group heifers, bulls or dairy cows together for quality reasons. They are free to apply other or additional grouping indicators. In case of a possible food warning, the number of potentially contaminated farms can be quickly identified and makes tracing the meat less complicated.

The mandatory beef label based on EC regulation 1760/2000 has to contain a reference to the country/ies of birth, fattening and slaughter of the animal or animals and a reference link between animals and meat, which is the registration number of the abattoir and the cutting plant and the production batch number. Any additional voluntary labeling information has to be approved by a competent authority of the EU member state. For Germany, this is the Bundesanstalt fuer Landwirtschaft und Ernaehrung (BLE) (Federal Office for Agriculture and Food).

Quality and Safety

As a result of a 70 percent decline in consumer demand for beef following the BSE crisis in 2001, the meat industry initiated a voluntary beef labeling scheme called 'Quality and Safety' (QS). The voluntary QS program documents and controls quality and safety during the entire production chain, from fodder feed to the retail counter, and certifies that all legal requirements are met and all involved handlers and processors are closely supervised. In addition to the legal requirements, QS developed a detailed 55-point production process charting all steps of the production chain, e.g. integration into a salmonellae monitoring system. QS participants have to register with the system organizer which is in the form of a private company. Participants have to fulfill a detailed list of self-regulated activities and are subject to control by neutral institutes which are accredited in accordance to EN 45011. These neutral controllers are performing physical tests as well as administrative tests to check whether the provided specifications have been considered appropriately in self-control systems, for instance through documentation and verification. As a third control layer these neutral institutes are controlled by the QS company or an appointed independent institution. Participants not complying with the QS rules can be fined up to Euro 30,000.

The frequency of auditing QS participants depends on their adherence level to the rules. Participants with a positive record of 90 to 100 percent (QS Standard I) will be audited once every two years. QS Standard II with 80-89 percent evaluation will be audited every year. QS Standard III, 70-79 percent, will be audited twice a year.

Quality assurance systems are not new to the processing industry but they are new to agricultural farms. Only well organized farms are in a position to comply with the stringent QS recording rules.

Conclusions

The individual consumer is not the driving source for the implementation of the mandatory cattle identification and beef labeling system. Consumers are also not the driving force for the voluntary QS label. Actually, trade sources report that hardly any consumers ask for label information. The individual consumer is not expected to learn the details behind the QS label. The system is designed to serve the food processing industry and the retail business. Together with the politicians, the processing industry and the retailers had been calling for a system to prevent potential food scares or, in the event of an actual scare, be in a position to get the situation under control within the shortest period possible. Since the QS label was just started in mid-2002, so far only three retail chains (including Wal-Mart Germany) participate in the QS system. However, since the German farmers' association is strongly encouraging German farmers to participate in the QS system it is highly likely that QS labeled meat will soon be the standard product and not yield any price premium.

Another observation is that the processing industry does not like cattle which have been born, raised or slaughtered in two or more different countries. The different countries have to be shown on the beef label. For such cattle products separate labels have to be printed. It is easier and more cost effective if the cattle have lived in only one EU country. Trade of cattle between EU countries will likely decrease because of the labeling requirements.